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Response to Review of *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*
by Swagato Chakravorty

My thanks to *Film-Philosophy* for inviting me to respond to Swagato Chakravorty's review of my book, *Film Worlds: A Philosophical Aesthetics of Cinema*. I appreciate Chakravorty's interest in the book and very much welcome all relevant and informed criticism. Unfortunately, much of the review falls into neither category. Along with a number of inaccurate descriptions of parts of the text and assertions of questionable relevance, it contains rather significant mischaracterisations and likely misimpressions. Some of the latter appear to evidence a rather shaky grasp of certain philosophical and theoretical terms, definitions, and movements.

In an opening salvo, Chakravorty opines that *Film Worlds* adds little or nothing to film theory that cannot be gleaned from reading the works of '[Siegfried] Kracauer... [Walter] Benjamin... [André] Bazin and... [Stanley] Cavell (among others).' He refers specifically to what he (erroneously) calls the book's 'conclusion' that a film's 'truth inheres in "intervention in, and transformation of what we ordinarily perceive, think, and believe."'

Excluding Benjamin, who wrote little on the moving image *per se*, a first point to make is that the three theorists mentioned are famously associated with a realist view of cinema. In contrast to the book's non-realist account of film art, their respective positions are anchored in a photographic ontology of (celluloid) film and various experiential and aesthetic consequences seen to follow from it. As is explicit throughout *Film Worlds*, I regard such realist positions as fundamentally partial; in themselves they are untenable bases for a better understanding of film art in its notable diversity of styles, modes, formats, and media. Most basically, my stated view is that, as representational artworks, films are nothing less than experientially existing, multi-layered, and specially constructed (albeit still 'virtual') *worlds*, as opposed to only indefinitely many versions, visions, or 'views' (in the Cavellian sense) of *the* (real) world. In this way, and contrary to Chakravorty's claim, I leave behind the more problematic arguments of these authors, not least from the standpoint of the now highly diverse contemporary 'audiovisual ecology' that Chakravorty himself emphasizes – even if I do at times retain certain more relevant and convincing insights from both these classical and from more recent realist and formalist positions.

Furthermore, the quoted statement has been rather minimally extracted from my testing of Martin Heidegger's notion of the truth of art as *aletheia* – together, and more prominently, with Hans-Georg Gadamer's allied hermeneutic perspective – against cinematic art. (By any standard

this is a far from 'positivistic' line of inquiry.) As an even moderately close reading reveals, it is presented as the 'conclusion' neither of this particular discussion of the transformative nature of filmmaking, nor of the last chapter in which it appears – let alone of the book as a whole. As indicated by the title of the chapter ('Toward an Existential Hermeneutics of Film Worlds') and the comments introducing it, this is the most speculative section of the book. Starting from a dual criterion for the greatest works of cinema proposed by François Truffaut, the chapter's main aim is to lay out additional relevant subjects and perspectives as concerning filmic truth and value in the hope of their further pursuance. In response to Chakravorty's suggestion that here and elsewhere I am only restating the familiar concept of 'defamiliarization,' he perhaps missed my specific explanation of why and how the intervention and transformation in question goes beyond at least one more precise and influential understanding of this term (p. 50). It is neither the *telos* of the concept of film worlds, nor integral to many of the book's other ideas and arguments, the majority of which are self-contained to their respective sections and chapters. While this is not the place to list them all, these include a detailed application of the major American philosopher Nelson Goodman's aesthetics (also not 'positivist,' and certainly not 'idealist') to cinema (Chapters 4 and 5); and a new conceptual mapping of a narrative film's affective and emotional structure, as comprised of three 'local' category types and a 'global' ('cineasthetic') world-feeling, which is both supervenient on them and a radically emergent feature of a film's temporal experience (Chapters 6 and 7).

That said, what *does* frame and inform all of the book's arguments, and is reiterated throughout, is a primary distinction between what I term the *world-in* and *world-of* films. Chakravorty either fundamentally misunderstands or misrepresents this distinction. His puzzlement over aspects of the book's methodology, argumentation, and intellectual reference points – together with a number of erroneous statements (such as that the book advocates 'taking apart' films full stop) – may well result from this apparent confusion.

In brief, the *world-in* a film is its basic representational and/or fictional world, i.e. what is frequently referred to as the *diegetic world* of a film. Contrary to the reviewer's suggestion, the *world-of* a film is *nowhere claimed to be the 'real world' and is specifically differentiated from it* (p. 34, for example). In fact, if it were not for this major difference there would be no need or advantage in theorizing film worlds as something much more than diegetic worlds. Rather, the *world-of* is defined throughout as the total communicative and expressive-affective structure and experience of a film (or its 'modality,' if one likes) as a *presentational*,

as well as representational, reality. As such it necessarily encompasses (but without contradiction also clearly exceeds) the *world-in*, and also includes various integrated and co-present extra- and non-diegetic, extra-narrative, formal, and stylistic features of the sort which are often associated with the artistic dimensions of films. Also a 'world' deserving of the label, the *world-of* a cinematic work evidences the significant alterity, strong holism, unique temporal and spatial properties, and physical and experiential self-enclosure, among other features, that are characteristic of worlds (see Chapter 2). Together with its many artistic functions discussed in the book, the *world-of*, as distinct from both the *world-in* (in-itself) and the real world, is also the source or 'location' of a film's periodic address of viewers, as theorized, for instance, in linguistic and textual pragmatic terms by Francesco Casetti, Christian Metz, and others.

To borrow his own phrase, Chakravorty then seems curiously to project a 'locked down' agenda of his own when he seeks greater 'acknowledgment' of installation works in film theory. In terms of this rather tangential concern, some but not all installation works also possess on this understanding a form of represented *world-in* (if not a fictional one) and certainly a presentational *world-of* – much like various documentaries, experimental films and digital-video works. Nonetheless, the relevance of Chakravorty's comment remains lost to me.

The reviewer is shocked at the working methodology stated in the book's introduction of 'bracketing off' what I refer to as 'historical, institutional, psychological, ethical, and other' aspects or conditions of films in the interest of what myself and others would consider *first-order* aesthetic or artistic ones. Putting aside the fact that Chakravorty omits to reference the qualifying 'temporarily' and 'provisionally' that I placed after 'bracketing' in the sentence in question, I adopted a strategy that is helpful in engaging with, clarifying, and critically expanding upon cinema in the context of relevant *aesthetic theory* (as the book's subtitle makes clear). All of the other dimensions of filmmaking and film viewing mentioned, as falling under the heading of culture (including film culture) are nowhere even faintly denied but specifically and repeatedly acknowledged (see pp. xv–xvi of the Introduction). Moreover, that film art is always the ongoing product of the history and institutions of the cinema is reflected in the final chapter's appeal to hermeneutics in order to affirm the full force and bearing of both tradition (in a very robust sense of the term, such as that developed by Gadamer) and cultural context in relation to film world-making and audience reception alike.

I am rather perplexed by the reviewer's bald assertion – in the context of what he sees as the book's conservative notions of experiential (or 'existential') and self-reflexive cinematic truth – that 'we are some decades past the time when judgment and taste constituted central parts of art criticism and history.' No matter how much these concepts and the criteria they include may have changed over time, I wonder upon what contemporary art criticism is focused, then, if not matters of taste and judgment, as per the definition of criticism itself? Whether in the field of criticism or relevant art and film theory, the forms of truth in question still very much exist. Furthermore, I believe it is important to retain them as at least one sort of normative-aesthetic criterion precisely when considering those works that represent the most significant and influential artistic achievements in the moving image, be they recent or past, digital or celluloid. Indeed, it is to these that my analysis is expressly confined. Neither of the twin poles of revealed or interpreted film world truth is fundamentally altered by recent technological developments, not least because by stated definition they are non-empirical and transmedial – much like the majority of the book's concepts and distinctions (including that between the world in and the world of films). Such truth and related value does not, for instance, hinge on the particular combination of indexicality and iconicity that characterises celluloid cinema and/or its potential psychological effects as emphasized in the realist theories discussed above, and which some see as challenged by digital image-making, manipulation and viewing. I assume Chakravorty to have these realities in mind when he refers without further explanation to the 'disappearing medium.'

With respect to the reviewer's umbrage at the complete 'absence of Malick,' I should point out that Terrence Malick is mentioned in the book. Moreover, in the book's introduction I note the difference between my film worlds concept and approach as a whole and at least one account of 'cinematic worlds' rooted in the Heidegger-Malick axis and the idea of world-disclosure (p. xxii, n. 20). The stated aim of *Film Worlds* is to be relevant and applicable to the works of numerous filmmakers and styles beyond Malick. Nonetheless, Malick scholars have already been keen to apply my ideas, as articulated in an earlier article on film worlds, to Malick's films and their meanings (see Yacavone 2008; Rybin 2011).

As will no doubt be clear to the readers of Chakravorty's review and this response, we have notably different understandings of what *Film Worlds* represents, attempts, and possibly succeeds at doing, together with its contemporary relevance to a number of subjects in film and media theory,

as well as philosophical aesthetics. I am happy to encourage those with an interest in any of the topics mentioned and in this exchange to pursue the book and to decide for themselves which general picture is the more accurate one.

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